



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge

Planning Update 5, December 2010



Cackling geese / © Dave Renwald

The Refuge's Final CCP is Completed

We appreciate your comments on the Draft CCP/EA

The final Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) is completed. We have completed our analysis of the alternatives, and Alternative 2 was selected for the refuge. The CCP was developed to provide reasonable, scientifically-grounded guidance for improving the refuge's wetland, riparian, bottomland forest, oak woodland, and grassland habitats, and for the long-term conservation of native plants and animals, including dusky Canada geese, cackling geese, sandhill cranes, and other migratory birds.

Actions for protecting and sustaining the refuge's natural resources, including habitats, migratory bird populations, and threatened, endangered, or rare species, are identified in the final CCP. Priority public use programs—waterfowl hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation—and the transportation infrastructure necessary to support these public uses in the future are also evaluated in the CCP.

Public Involvement

We sincerely appreciate the individuals and organizations

that participated in our planning process and contributed valuable comments. Since the last planning update announcing the public comment period for the draft CCP/EA, the planning team has responded to comments, and completed revisions to the CCP. Appendix N in the final CCP includes copies of the comments we received on the draft CCP/EA and our responses.

A copy of the final CCP can be obtained by contacting the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex at (360) 887-4106, or by downloading a copy from our Web site (see page 7 for options).

What Happens Next?

After the Final CCP was completed, our Regional Director decided which alternative to implement on the Refuge, and documented the decision in a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), which has been released to the public as part of the Final CCP.

Now that the FONSI has been signed, we can begin implementing CCP strategies at the Refuge. Some actions will require new funding. Those actions will be implemented as funding becomes available.

Highlights of the Final CCP

The CCP will guide Refuge management over the next 15 years. Under the Final CCP, the Refuge will continue to protect, maintain, and where feasible, restore habitat for priority species, including dusky Canada geese, cackling geese, and other waterfowl; sandhill cranes; and imperiled Federal- and State-listed species. The Refuge will continue to provide high-quality green forage for geese in improved pastures and wet meadows. Invasive species and State- and county-listed noxious weeds will continue to be an important management focus. Current public use areas and closures will remain

in effect. The waterfowl hunt area and location will remain unchanged. The existing auto tour route will continue to be open year-round.

Management changes over the next 15 years include:

- Increasing cropland and wet meadow acreage to benefit dusky Canada geese and sandhill cranes.
- Managing wetlands to increase productivity, reduce invasive species, and reduce water pumping costs.
- Increasing control of invasive species in bottomland forest and oak woodland.
- Restoring floodplain forest and oak woodland habitat, mainly in old field areas.
- Conducting habitat assessments to guide restoration of tidally influenced wetlands.
- Conducting feasibility studies for



A red-tailed hawk enjoys the refuge/
USFWS



Western pond turtle/USFWS

reintroducing native species such as Columbian white-tailed deer and the western pond turtle.

- Increasing inventory and monitoring efforts.
- Developing a new access point to the River 'S' Unit, including a 2-lane bridge and 1-mile entrance road.
- Moving the hunter check station to the current visitor entrance and establishing up to 2 new blinds within the Teal Marsh area.
- Slightly shortening the auto tour route (from 4.3 to 4.0 miles) to reduce disturbances to dusky Canada geese and sandhill cranes.
- Constructing a seasonal 1.5-mile dike-top wildlife observation trail on the River 'S' Unit.
- Increasing environmental and cultural resources education and interpretation programs.

Planning Schedule

Planning Step

Planning Update 1 (<i>issued</i>).....	August 2006
Public Meetings (<i>completed</i>).....	September 2006
Planning Update 2 (<i>issued</i>).....	January 2007
Planning Update 3 (<i>issued</i>).....	March 2009
Public Meeting (<i>completed</i>).....	March 26, 2009
Planning Update 4 (<i>issued</i>).....	June 2010
Draft CCP/EA Public Comment Period (<i>completed</i>).....	June 15-July 16, 2010
Final CCP/EA (<i>issued</i>).....	December 2010
Planning Update 5 (<i>issued</i>).....	December 2010

Summary of Public Comments and Responses

Now that the Service's Regional Director for the Pacific Region has signed the final CCP and FONSI, the CCP planning process is completed. We initiated the public scoping phase of the planning process in August 2006 by announcing our intention to complete a CCP in the *Federal Register*. Simultaneously, we distributed Planning Update 1, announcing the planning process and public open house meetings and requesting public comments. We held two public open-house meetings in September 2006.

In January 2007, we distributed Planning Update 2, which included a summary of key issues and public comments on these issues. In Planning Update 3, distributed in March 2009, we requested your comments on preliminary draft alternatives. In Planning Update 4,

distributed in June 2010, we requested your comments on the draft CCP/EA. We addressed your comments in the final CCP.

We appreciate all the comments we received during the planning process and encourage you to stay involved in the refuge's activities. Successful implementation of the CCP is largely dependent upon continued public support, partnerships, funding, and volunteer efforts.

The Service received written comment letters on the draft CCP/EA from 16 interested parties: the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Port of Ridgefield, the Washington Waterfowl Association (Lower Columbia River Chapter), the

Vancouver Audubon Society, the Ridgefield Junction Neighborhood Association, and members of the general public.

Public comments and our responses to them are presented in Appendix N of the CCP. The included table is a summary of comments received and our responses. The comments received did not address any topics which have not already been addressed in the NEPA planning process for the Ridgefield NWR CCP. Responding to these comments did not require changes to the CCP, or to the Compatibility Determinations included with the CCP. At the request of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, we included a strategy for sandhill crane monitoring in the CCP (Chapter 2, Objective 7.2) since it was consistent with both refuge purposes and the CCP goals and objectives.



Oregon white oak on the Carty Unit/USFWS

Comment on Draft CCP/EA	FWS Response
Waterfowl Hunting	
<p>Expand the waterfowl hunting area on the refuge. Over the years, hunting blinds have been lost while refuge acreage, and other public use opportunities, have expanded. Demand for waterfowl hunting currently exceeds opportunity.</p> <p>Combine Alternatives 3 and 4 (close south end of auto tour route during waterfowl hunt season, close 3 south blinds to goose hunting, and expand hunt area to include 250 acres on Bachelor Island).</p>	<p>Most of Ridgefield NWR was purchased under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act (Act). The Act states the amount of the refuge open to waterfowl hunting, up to the maximum 40%, is variable and subject to the mandate that the refuge meet the needs of wildlife first. Throughout the development of the alternatives for the CCP, the refuge has sought to comply with provisions in the Pacific Flyway Management Plan for the Dusky Canada Goose (2008) and the Northwest Oregon/Southwest Washington Canada Goose Agricultural Depredation Control Plan (1998). As a signatory to these plans, the Service has agreed to take steps to increase the numbers of these birds using the refuge through both public use management and habitat management. Dusky Canada geese are below their target populations. Dusky Canada goose numbers in particular have been in a long-term decline and the refuge is committed to improving our habitat management to benefit this species. Bachelor Island provides high quality habitat and is used by dusky Canada geese and a large number of cackling geese. It is also an important foraging and roosting area for sandhill cranes. In addition, current land use patterns in southwest Washington and northwest Oregon show a continual loss of undeveloped land in the vicinity of the refuge, increasing the importance of refuge lands to wildlife. Therefore the refuge has decided not to convert sanctuary areas such as Bachelor Island to public use areas.</p>
<p>Concern over loss of hunting opportunities on the refuge.</p>	<p>Chapter 2, Features Common to All Alternatives, states the refuge will continue to provide, at minimum, its current waterfowl hunting opportunity. In the CCP the refuge has stated our commitment to maintaining at least the current number of hunt blinds and hunt area. Blind locations may need to be changed to permit safe operation of the new access road and bridge, but the refuge is committed to establishing new blinds to replace those lost.</p>
Facilities and Transportation Access	
<p>The new nature center should be sited on Port property, not on refuge property as described in the draft CCP. The CCP did not consider alternate sites or consider social, economic, and environmental costs/benefits of alternate sites.</p>	<p>This issue is outside the scope of the CCP. Funding timelines required that the placement of a nature center and location of a pedestrian bridge be addressed in a separate Environmental Assessment (EA). The public comment period for this EA has closed and the Finding of No Significant Impact was issued on April 29, 2010. A visitor center sited on Port property would require a road to be built to transport participants in our environmental and cultural education programs to the Carty Unit and Plankhouse. This road would require considerable amounts of wetland fill and would require the refuge to obtain a Section 404 permit from the Corps of Engineers. With regard to impacts to jurisdictional wetlands, the Corps can only permit the “least environmentally-damaging practicable alternative (LEDPA).” The proposed visitor center site on the Carty Unit would have fewer wetland impacts and thus is the only alternative that meets the LEDPA criteria.</p>
Wildlife Observation and Photography, Interpretation and Environmental Education	
<p>Open the hunt area to wildlife viewing outside of the hunt season.</p>	<p>The draft CCP/EA has not proposed expansion of wildlife observation/photography into habitat for wintering waterfowl due to conflicts with resource protection (providing adequate sanctuary area for migratory birds).</p>

General Support for Alternatives	
<p>Supports Alternative 2. Alternative 2 represents a good balance between providing habitat and sanctuary areas for wildlife, and providing wildlife-dependent recreation. It creates a balance between consumptive and non-consumptive uses. It addresses current transportation issues, the need for bridge replacement, keeps the existing auto tour route and hunt area, and enhances other public use programs.</p>	<p>The refuge considered the goals and objectives contained in the Pacific Flyway Management Plan for the Dusky Canada Goose (2008) and the Northwest Oregon/Southwest Washington Canada Goose Agricultural Depredation Control Plan (1998) during planning. As a signatory to these plans, the Service has agreed to take steps to increase the numbers of these birds using the refuge through both public use management and habitat management. The refuge has decided that maintaining the existing sanctuary areas on the refuge and implementing various habitat improvements described in the CCP will help these species reach established goals.</p> <p>The refuge is also required to consider a large number of factors in developing and operating its public use programs, including public interests, safety, impacts to resources, and how these programs achieve refuge purposes. This process is described in detail in Appendices A and B (Appropriate Use Findings and Compatibility Determinations) in the CCP.</p>
<p>Supports proposed improvements to public use programs and access, but needs of wildlife should come first. Consider restricting number of refuge users in the future if impacts to users become too great.</p>	<p>Protection of sensitive species from undue disturbance is important in the planning of any public use program. An important part of the planning process is determining which public uses would be allowed (i.e., are appropriate and compatible) and what conditions would have to be in place to prevent the use from detracting from the refuge purposes. By policy, any public use may not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the mission of the Refuge System or purposes for which the refuge was established. In order to comply with our refuge purposes and Flyway management plans for the dusky Canada goose, the Service is committed to increasing the numbers of this species through both public use management and habitat management.</p>
Habitat Management	
<p>Maintain existing forage areas for wintering geese and expand/enhance goose habitat. State and Federal lands should be managed to hold geese as much as possible to reduce depredation on private land.</p>	<p>As a signatory to the Pacific Flyway Management Plan for the Dusky Canada Goose (2008) and the Northwest Oregon/Southwest Washington Canada Goose Agricultural Depredation Control Plan (1998), the Service has agreed to take steps to increase the numbers of these birds using the refuge through both public use management and habitat management and to adhere to the recommendations prescribed in these plans. To protect dusky Canada geese, the refuge's hunt program tiers to the annual recommendations of the Pacific Flyway Council regarding annual harvest quotas designed to protect dusky populations. The refuge maintains its own quota (currently 5 birds) and prohibits on-refuge goose hunting once the refuge's annual dusky harvest quota has been reached (see Appendix B, Compatibility Determination-Waterfowl Hunting). To ensure compliance to season limits for dusky Canada geese and other waterfowl, the refuge's hunt program conducts periodic law enforcement sweeps, has a staff present on all hunt days, requires mandatory check in/out for all hunters, and operates an on-site check station serving only the refuge's hunt program. These measures are all intended to minimize the potential impacts to dusky Canada geese populations within the framework of the Pacific Flyway Management Plan for the Dusky Canada Goose.</p> <p>Starting in the mid-1990s, staff of the refuge started to note delayed migration of cackling geese. In 1998 the refuge implemented area closures on the River 'S' Unit until May 1st to prevent undue disturbance to migrating waterfowl. This date is consistent with all alternatives within the draft</p>
<p>Hunt programs should reduce potential impacts to dusky Canada geese. Blinds in core dusky use areas should be eliminated. Maintain Bachelor Island as a sanctuary area.</p>	
<p>Conduct annual assessments of public use programs relating to goose habitat management issues at Ridgefield and other State/Federal wildlife management areas with FWS, WDFW and ODFW personnel.</p>	

	<p>CCP/EA. If further migration delays continue, the refuge has mechanisms to implement changes to the seasonal opening and closing of public use areas. Also, the refuge has extended weekly goose surveys into late April to ensure that counts and collar search data are collected for migrating geese to assist us in determining the needs of geese using the refuge.</p> <p>The refuge acknowledges the value of annual coordination with Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife in the management of shared resources and wildlife. Section 2.3.1, Features Common to all Alternatives, states that the Service would continue to maintain regular discussions with the Washington and Oregon Departments of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW and ODFW) on management of dusky Canada geese, cackling geese, and other waterfowl; depredation; updates of waterfowl management and depredation plans; wildlife monitoring; hunting and fishing seasons and regulations; and management of Federal and State listed species.</p>
Close south end of auto tour route Oct 1-April 30 to provide sanctuary for, and reduce impacts to, dusky Canada geese and cackling geese.	Any major reconfiguration of the auto tour route would route public use through areas adjacent to waterfowl habitat. The proposed shortened route would provide public access to areas frequently used by dusky Canada and cackling geese, including the dike along north Rest Lake, which is used as a roost for dusky Canada and cackling geese. Data that show a direct link between the auto tour route in its current configuration and declines in wildlife use are lacking. Goose surveys before and after the tour route was expanded to its current configuration do not show a clear trend. The Preferred Alternative in the draft CCP/EA proposed the route remain in its current location and seasonality, except for eliminating a small jog protruding into Swartz Field.
Opposes Alternative 4, closure of south end of the auto tour route.	See above.
Supports feasibility study for establishment of nonessential experimental population (NEP) of Columbian white-tailed deer (CWTD) on the Refuge.	The feasibility study will examine the potential of animal dispersal and subsequent impacts to recreational activities, proximal landowners, and local depredation. Establishment of a population of CWTD will require a shift and/or the addition of refuge resources for CWTD management and protection. The feasibility study will identify additional tasks that may be required, including, but not limited to, predator management, crop production, forest restoration, and invasive species control. In the CCP “nonessential experimental population” has been changed to “population,” since the status of CWTD relocated to RNWR would depend upon results of the feasibility study.
Supports replacing the River ‘S’ Bridge in its current location with a bridge that spans both Lake River and the BNSF railroad tracks, due to smaller footprint and environmental impact.	The Transportation Access Analysis prepared May 2009 by the Western Federal Lands Highway Division (Appendix L) analyzed this alternative. This report showed that the road from Hillhurst to the bridge would need to be widened. To accommodate this widening, a significant number of trees would have to be removed in an area with steep slopes that is subject to frequent slides. The cost of the project is high, based upon the span required to eliminate the at-grade railroad crossing and span Lake River (a navigable waterway). The project would also require land acquisition to place the existing roadway and project’s footprint into refuge ownership. Therefore, replacing the bridge at its current location was not selected as the Preferred Alternative for the CCP.
Conduct surveys to document nesting by Pacific sandhill cranes.	In recognition of the breeding potential of sandhill cranes in the region, a strategy will be added to Chapter 2.4.7, Objective 7.2 (Conduct Surveys) related to the monitoring for cranes during the breeding season and documentation of nesting attempts.

The Final CCP is available as follows:

Copies of the Final CCP printed in book form or on CD-ROM may be obtained by contacting:

Bob Flores, Project Leader
Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex
P.O. Box 457
Ridgefield, WA 98642
Phone (360) 887-4106

View or download the CCP from the following Internet sites.

<http://www.fws.gov/ridgefieldrefuges/ridgefield> or <http://www.fws.gov/pacific/planning/>

A printed copy of the CCP/EA is available at each of the following libraries:

Ridgefield Community Library, 210 North Main Ave., Ridgefield, WA 98642;

Vancouver Community Library, 1007 East Mill Plain Blvd., Vancouver, WA 98663; and

Multnomah County Central Library, 801 SW 10th Ave., Portland, OR 97205.

Your Refuge: Leaner, Greener and Reaching Out

To promote the availability of the CCP to a wider audience, and to reduce our use of the natural resources used to produce paper and CD-ROM copies of our documents, we will be posting the CCP on two websites and providing each of the listed libraries a printed and CD-ROM copy. Limited printed and CD-ROM copies are available; please contact us if you need to obtain a copy.



Above: River otters remain alert while resting/USFWS



Left: Cathlapotle Plankhouse in winter/USFWS



Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex
P.O. Box 457
Ridgefield, WA 98642

In this issue:

The Ridgefield National
Wildlife Refuge's Final
CCP is completed!

8

For More Information

Questions about the CCP may be directed to Bob Flores, Project Leader at Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex, by any of the following methods:

Mail:

Bob Flores, Project Leader
Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex
P.O. Box 457
Ridgefield, WA 98642

Phone: (360) 887-4106

Fax: (360) 887-4109

Web site: www.fws.gov/ridgefieldrefuges/ridgefield; select "Contact Us."

E-mail: FW1PlanningComments@fws.gov



*Sandhill crane/
© Roger Windemuth*